

THINKING OUTSIDE THE TENT ON TENTS: SOME POINTS TO CONSIDER

Tents Are a Poor Shelter Option. Tents are useful when there are absolutely no other shelter options, but this is hardly ever the case, as disasters and conflicts rarely generate complete and total destruction of permanent structures. Assessment of shelter conditions and needs typically results in the identification of hosting activities in homes and community facilities, as well as spontaneous rebuilding efforts featuring salvaging of building materials, which could be supplemented with plastic sheeting, tools, and other inputs. These two shelter responses are cost-effective, socially acceptable, and self-selected options to tents.

Tents Are Too Small. No -- repeat, no -- tent provided by leading humanitarian organizations conforms to Sphere Project guidelines for families of more than four people, and average family sizes are typically larger in nearly all places where OFDA provides assistance. It is more than understandable, then, why people get sick, why protection issues emerge, or why psycho-social issues emerge when they have to live in undersized tents for more than a short period of time.

Tents Are Expensive. Even the most modest of tents typically cost \$150-\$200, and often much more. Transport and handling costs increase the price further. The total cost of tent provision is often greater than the hosting or salvaged-based options mentioned above, and the investment in tents does not typically generate economic benefits in affected communities, unlike the aforementioned options. Careful consideration of contextual conditions, then, could result in a basis for claiming that cost-effective and economically beneficial options to tents already exist in affected communities.

Tents Are Not Very Flexible. Related to the above claim of limited size, tents promote a "one-size-fits-all" approach to shelter, in contrast to the use of plastic sheeting, salvaged building materials, and other inputs, which can be applied to specific family and site conditions in a flexible manner, thereby resulting in more appropriate and acceptable shelter.

Tents Do Not Make Very Good Shelter. As a general rule, tents used by the humanitarian community are difficult and costly to winterize, hot in warm weather, leaky during rainy weather, difficult to keep clean, hard and potentially hazardous to cook in, do not last very long, and generally lack privacy for occupants. An extreme example of the latter point was found in Burma earlier this year, where authorities forced up to ten unrelated cyclone survivors to occupy tents designed for four, thus generating a range of protection, psycho-social, and gender concerns.

Tents Are Often Spelled C-A-M-P-S. Tents are a core feature of camp development efforts, which are often unnecessary, reflecting rushed judgments on shelter needs, rather than careful assessment of shelter conditions. Only in recent years have tents been widely considered for use in non-camp settings, including on the land of displaced populations. While this is often preferable to camp settings, other options typically exist that would reduce the need for tents.

Tents Retard Recovery and Reconstruction. Recovery begins yesterday for affected populations, and it's often the case that they will start rebuilding their homes, or building new ones, using whatever materials are available, rather than wait for assistance from others. In far too many cases, then, provision of tents is a step backwards on the road to recovery and reconstruction. This retrograde action is not useful, efficient, cost-effective, or appreciated. Again, careful assessment of shelter conditions and needs might identify emergent, spontaneous recovery efforts that could be supported, rather than resort to tents as a default response.